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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the meanings and distribution of the perfect in contemporary American English prose, with reference to problems encountered in teaching English as a second language. The English perfect comprises forms traditionally called present perfect tense, past perfect tense, and perfects of the infinitive, gerund and present participle. All forms have a tense function: to situate the action or state conveyed by the lexical verb in a time period which begins before and extends to a point of reference that varies depending on the perfect form in question. Each instance of the perfect conveys one of three secondary meanings: single action, iteration, continuation. This meaning depends partly on the nature of the lexical verb and partly on context. The verification of this theory of meaning of the American English perfect and a study of its distribution in contemporary writing are accomplished by use of the Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English. Instances of the perfect from approximately 300,000 words, or 30 percent of the Corpus are extracted with 10 words of context from either side, analyzed for meaning, and the distribution of the various forms in written American English is determined. (Author/CLK)

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MEANINGS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE PERFECT IN PRESENT-DAY AMERICAN ENGLISH PROSE

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INTRODUCTION. One who has attempted, even cursorily, to discover the rationale for the use of the American English perfect in expressions such as "I have been here for ten minutes," "Haven't you seen him?" and "I had moved there before she arrived" may finally agree with John B. Carroll, who said that although a great deal of effort has been expended on the study of the English perfect, very little is actually known about its meaning.[1] The lack of knowledge is not confined to a single school in linguistics. Robin Lakoff has summed it up in the title of a section on tense, "A perfect mystery at present," double entendre which expresses her attitude, and that of many others, toward the English perfect.[2] Below, the lack of consensus will be explored more fully. For the moment, suffice it to say that our present ignorance precludes development of a comprehensive theory of the English verb, hinders comparative studies, depending, as they do, on accurate descriptions of particular languages, and postpones the discovery of universals. It also creates difficulties in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

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TERMINOLOGY. One way in which conflict in theories of meaning of the perfect manifests itself is in differing terminologies. As cover term, one sees both perfect and perfect tense, but to use the latter, although it is traditional, is to take sides in a controversy: are the traditionalists' English perfect tenses more properly tense or aspect, or both or neither? The term perfect is used by some to designate what others name present perfect. At the outset, then, it is important to establish a consistent terminology. Particular choices, for example, present instead of non-past, are made in order to conform to tradition where possible anc convenient, in the hope that the present study will be useful not only to professional linguists but also others.

Following are sets of terms to be used in the study.

1. FORMS OF THE ENGLISH VERB (ADAPTED FROM BLOCH[3])

Form	Examples
Base--the stem	live, eat, go
Gerundive--the base + {ING}	living, eating, going
Past participle--the base + {EN}	lived, eaten, gone
Past--the base + {ED}	lived, ate, went

2. BASIC VERBAL CATEGORIES (ADAPTED FROM SCHOGHT[4])

Category	Examples
Tense--situates the verb grammatically in the speaker's view of time	
A. Past tense--the past form as used for predication in the main clause.	He lived. We ate. They went.
B. Present tense--the base form, with {S} where appropriate,	He lives. We eat. I go.

as used for predication in the main clause

Aspect--characterizes, in non-temporal, non-modal contrast to another verb form, the speaker's view of the unfolding of the action

A. Simple--forms used to express action view unitarily — I work. I worked.

B. Progressive--forms of the auxiliary be + gerunding of lexical verb, used to express the speaker's view of an action in progress — I am working. I was working.

3. FORMS OF THE PERFECT

Form	Examples
Base perfect--base of auxiliary have + past participle of lexical verb	have gone, have eaten
Gerundive perfect--gerundive of have + past participle of lexical verb	having eaten, having gone
Present perfect--present tense of have + past participle of lexical verb	I have eaten. You have gone.
Past perfect--past tense of have + past participle of lexical verb	I had eaten. You had gone.

The base perfect and gerundive perfect have various syntactic functions. The base perfect with or without the introducer to, i.e., the perfect infinitive, functions nominally, "I would like to have gone"; adjectivally, "the thing to have done"; verbally in combination with modals, "He may have gone." The gerundive perfect functions nominally, "She is tired from having danced too much";

adjectivally, "Having danced too much, she is tired."

In summary: perfect is here used as a cover term for any form of the auxiliary have + past participle of another verb. Traditionally--and here, too--the forms or functions are called, variously, present perfect, past perfect, perfect infinitive, perfect gerund, and perfect of present participle.

PREVAILING THEORIES. In the literature on the perfect, its various forms are given grossly unequal treatment. Overwhelming attention is focussed on the present perfect, very little on the past perfect. The base and gerundive perfects, if mentioned at all, are listed with infinitives, gerunds, and present participles; listing is all that is done. No attempt is customarily made to give the meaning of the non-finite forms or to link them comprehensively with other forms of the perfect.

Current relevance. The dominant theory of the present perfect is called current relevance, relevant anteriority, and the like. It is often attributed to Jespersen, and indeed, his statement is clear and clearly influential.[5]

> The [present] perfect is a retrospective present, which connects a past occurrence with the present time, either as continued up to the present moment (inclusive time), or as having results or consequences bearing on the present moment.

Whether the present perfect is any species of present, retrospective or otherwise will be seen later. "As continued up to the present moment" explains such instances as "I have now been speaking for about five minutes" and I have been in Denver since Thursday morning."

The last phrase, "having results or consequences bearing on the present moment," is not sufficient as an explanation. The invalidity of this doctrine of current relevance can be shown

first by showing that at least one other tense of English has current relevance also, and thus that this feature by itself cannot distinguish the present perfect; and second by showing that it is something else that is at issue.

Now, it must be asked why human beings mention anything at all--event, fact, emotion, opinion. We mention things because they are important, because precisely they have results that bear on the moment of mentioning. So, whether we say, "Joe has just died" or "Joe just died," we do it because it matters when we say it. We don't use language merely to exercise our mouths or fingers, but because what we write or say is to some degree important. Martin Joos has put it very well:[6]

> . . . it is fair to say that language is not organized for entirely idle talk but is rather well adapted to mentioning things because they matter. Let us take it as axiomatic that the referent of a finite verb is regularly the cause of certain effects--unknown, perhaps, often unforeseen, but in any case not assumed to be non-existent--since otherwise the finite verb would be idle, otiose, and rather left unused.

Current relevance marks every use of verbs in English, and so cannot be the exclusive property of the present perfect.

There remains the possibility that the present perfect has only current relevance, and that the past, present, etc. have that together with other distinguishing features. To see that this is not so, let us look at an example in context. The citation is from a work by Sybil Bedford, The Trial of Dr. Adams, which recounts a murder trial. It is from a moment toward the end, specifically, from the judge's charge to the jury just before it retires, having heard all the evidence.[7]

> The fact that I held that it was a matter for you to determine and not for me, does not mean he [the prosecutor] was not in a position to make a strong submission. On the

> evidence of Dr. Ashby, he clearly was; and he has not been able to fortify it by the evidence of Dr. Harman.

The testimony of the prosecution witnesses Dr. Ashby and Dr. Harman concerning the drugs administered to the murder victim has enabled the prosecutor to make a strong submission of Dr. Adams's guilt in his summary. Ms. Bedford used past tense to state the prosecutor's position on the effect of Dr. Ashby's evidence, present perfect on the effect of Dr. Harman's. Careful reading of this extract, and of the book from which it is taken, does not indicate that the evidence of one or the other doctor is more important or that one is narrative and the other has only current relevance. What accounts for the difference?

The perfect as tense. Sørensen[8] indicates the reason when he discusses the present perfect as "recent past," for here he has seen that the present perfect concerns tense, not aspect. The most comprehensive treatment of present and past perfect as tenses is that of Ota.[9]

> Present perfect, on the other hand, indicates the occurrence of an action or the existence of a state in or for a period of time extending from some time in the past up till the moment of speaking . . .
>
> In the case of past perfect, the end point of the period is some time in the past. Thus past perfect indicates the occurrence of an action or the existence of a state prior to some time in the past; this reference time will be given by the context (either verbal or situational). Both present and past perfect indicate a period of time. What distinguishes them is the difference in the end point of that period.

One cannot quarrel with his treatment of the past perfect, and Ota has accounted for most uses of the present perfect, but noe ont such as "When I have seen him, I'll let you know," for the seeing is not situated in a period of time ending at the moment of speaking.

And Ota did not deal with base and gerundive perfects.

MEANINGS OF THE AMERICAN ENGLISH PERFECT. The essential meaning, the common denominator, of all forms of the perfect is priority to a point of reference. That is, the action rendered in the perfect is referred to a period of time before, and extending up to, a reference point. The finite perfects, the present and hast perfects, each have a characteristic point of reference. That of the past perfect is a point in the past; that of the present perfect is in the non-past, i.e., from the present onward.

The non-finite forms, the base perfect and the gerundive perfect, in their syntactic uses as infinite, gerund and present participle, have variability of reference point. In other words, it may be past or non-past, depending on context. To illustrate for the perfect of the present participle:

Past:	Having gribbed, I zaqqed.
Present:	Having gribbed, I am zaqqing.
Future:	Having gribbed, I will zaq.

The latter is of course ambiguous, but one of the possible readings puts the gribbing in the future. The other forms can be illustrated in similar fashion.

Ota and others are perceptive in their realization that part of the previous difficult in understanding the perfect results from confusion with a basic division of English verbs. The categories are called active/stative, conclusive/inconclusive, telic/atelic, etc. The division is between verbs whose action is ordinarily viewed of momentary, such as awaken, and those who action is viewed as occuring over a period of time, such as sleep. Ota recognizes

that English verbs occur in the perfect with what he called <u>overtones</u>, of which there are three:

single action--characterizes an action viewd unitarily

iterative--characterizes an action viewed as repeated at least once

continuative--characterizes an action viewed as occurring over a period of time

In summary: the essential meaning of the perfect in English is priority to a point of reference. The finite forms each have a characteristic point of reference. The non-finite forms have variable points determinable from the context. An action is conveyed in the perfect with one of three overtones, single action, iterative, or continuative.

DATA COLLECTION. To verify the theory of meanings and to study the distribution of the perfect in American English prose, 300,000 words, or 30%, of the Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English[10] were studied. Each occurrence of the perfect was extracted, together with approximately 10 words of context on either side.

RESULTS. <u>Theory of meanings</u>. The theory of meanings was not substantially disproved in the instances of the perfect studied, in that relatively few of the instances are not explainable in its terms. All three overtones with present and past perfect were found. For the gerundive perfect, all overtones occur with perfect of present participle, but none for iterative of perfect gerund. For the base perfect, the perfect of the indinitive was found in all overtones. The modals discussed by Ehrman[11] were studied separately, with these findings: No instances with <u>can</u>, <u>shall</u>, <u>ought to</u>:

no iterative with could, should, must; no single action with will; others were found.

The following instances cannot be accounted for:

2--ambiguous between is and has

1--typographical error

8--ambiguous between past perfect and simple past in deletion

1--present perfect out of time sequence

1--past perfect with no past point of reference; seems to depend on formally past were (here, unreal present-time use of past tense)

14--have got (= have)

20--have got to (= have to)

Distribution. Table 1 shows absolute numbers of perfect found in 300,000 words. Because of the differing numbers of 2000-word extracts within the two major categories Informative and Imaginative Prose, the average number per extract is given.

TABLE 1

AVERAGE FREQUENCIES OF PERFECT BY MAJOR CATEGORY

Category	Samples	Base	Average	Gerundive	Average	Present	Average	Past	Average
I	111	174	1.57	22	0.19	1105	9.96	496	2.11
II	39	110	2.82	11	0.28	97	2.49	782	20.05

Table 2 gives a detailed breakdown of instances of non-finite forms.

TABLE 2

CATEGORY FREQUENCY OF NON-FINITES BY SYNTACTIC FUNCTION

Ctgry.	Number	Base		Gerundive	
		Modals	Infin.	Part.	Gerund
I	111	145	29	9	13
II	39	103	7	10	1

Use with modals accounts for the majority of instances of the base perfect, in fact, 87.3%. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the base perfect with modals.

Forty instances of conditional sentence are found. Thirty of them conform to a textbook pattern, with past perfect in the *if* clause and past of modal + perfect base in the *result* clause, i.e., "If I had seen him, I would have told you." Of the 30, the modal in the result clause is *would* in 24 sentences, *might* in 3 and *could* in 3. Of the remaining 10 sentences, 4 have the condition in past perfect and the result in *would* or *might* + base only. *Would* and *might*, of course, are formally past tense, and so ambiguous as to real time, but they are interpretable as present tense in these instances: "Had they not gotten me to the hospital when they did, perhaps I would not be here. . . ." The other cases reflect various peculiarities, including, it appears, idiosyncracy of a single author. Conditional sentences occur on

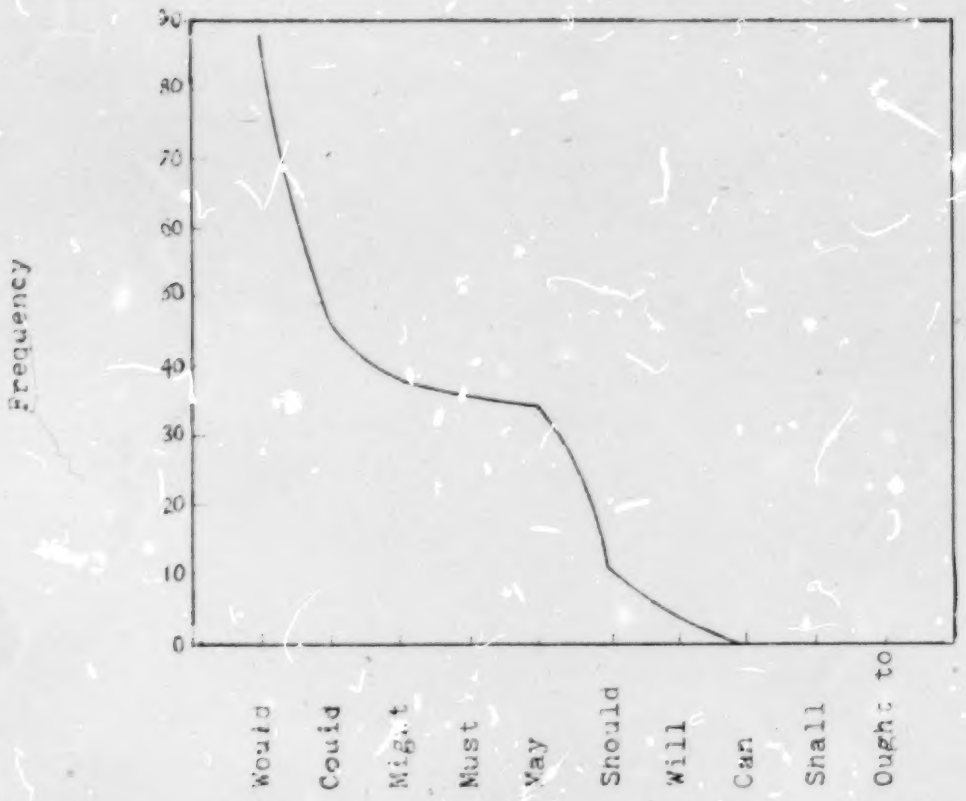


FIGURE 1

Frequency of Modals with Perfect in 300,000 Words

the average more frequently in Imaginative Prose (0.41 per sample) than in Informative Prose (0.22 per sample), but obviously not often in either.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of present perfect according to the subcategories of the Corpus, Figure 3 the distribution of past perfect.

The division of regular and irregular participles is roughly equal: 1382 instances of regular participles, 1354 of irregulars. The distribution of irregular past participles is shown in Figure 4. One hundred eight irregular verbs in perfect

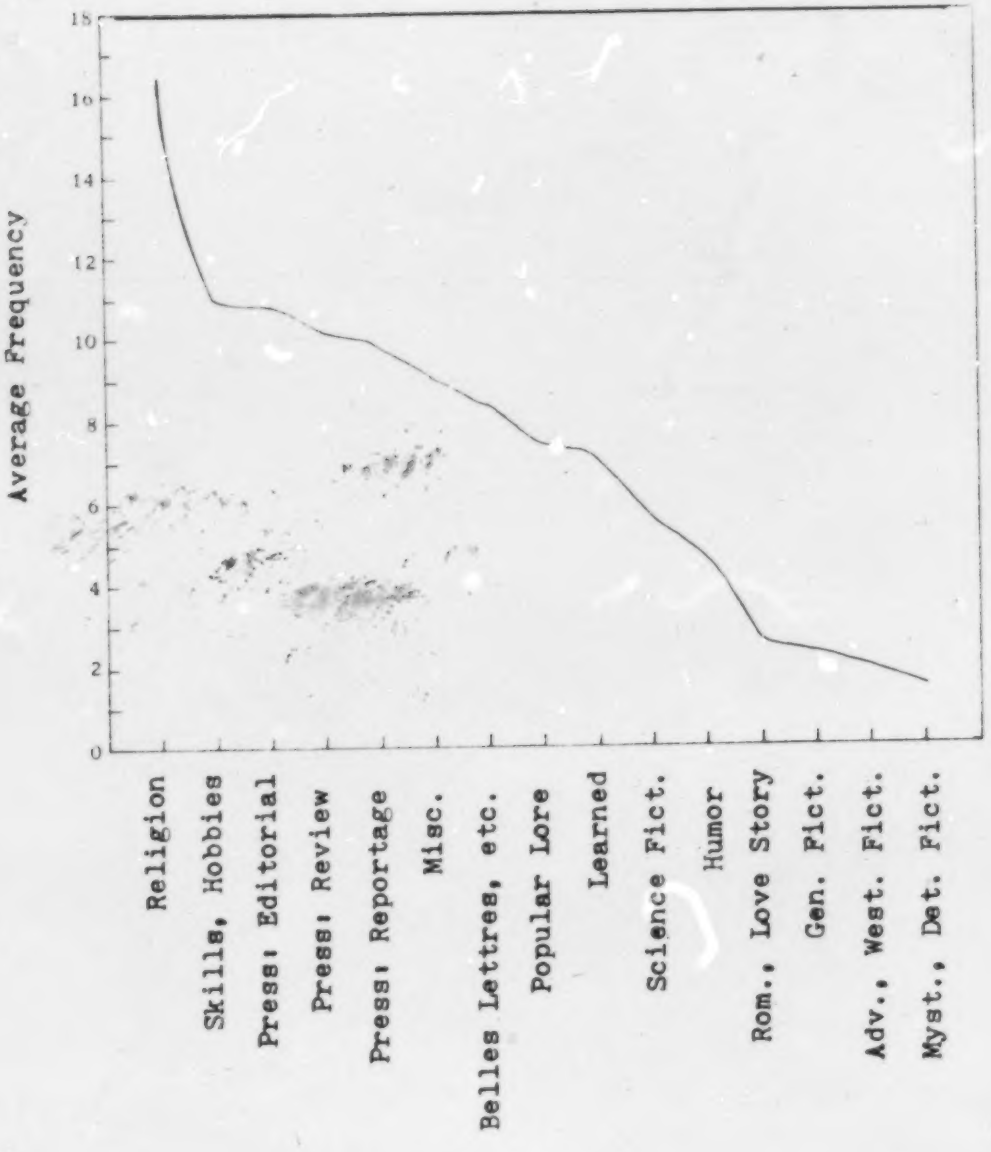


Figure 2

Average Frequency of Present Perfect by Subcategory

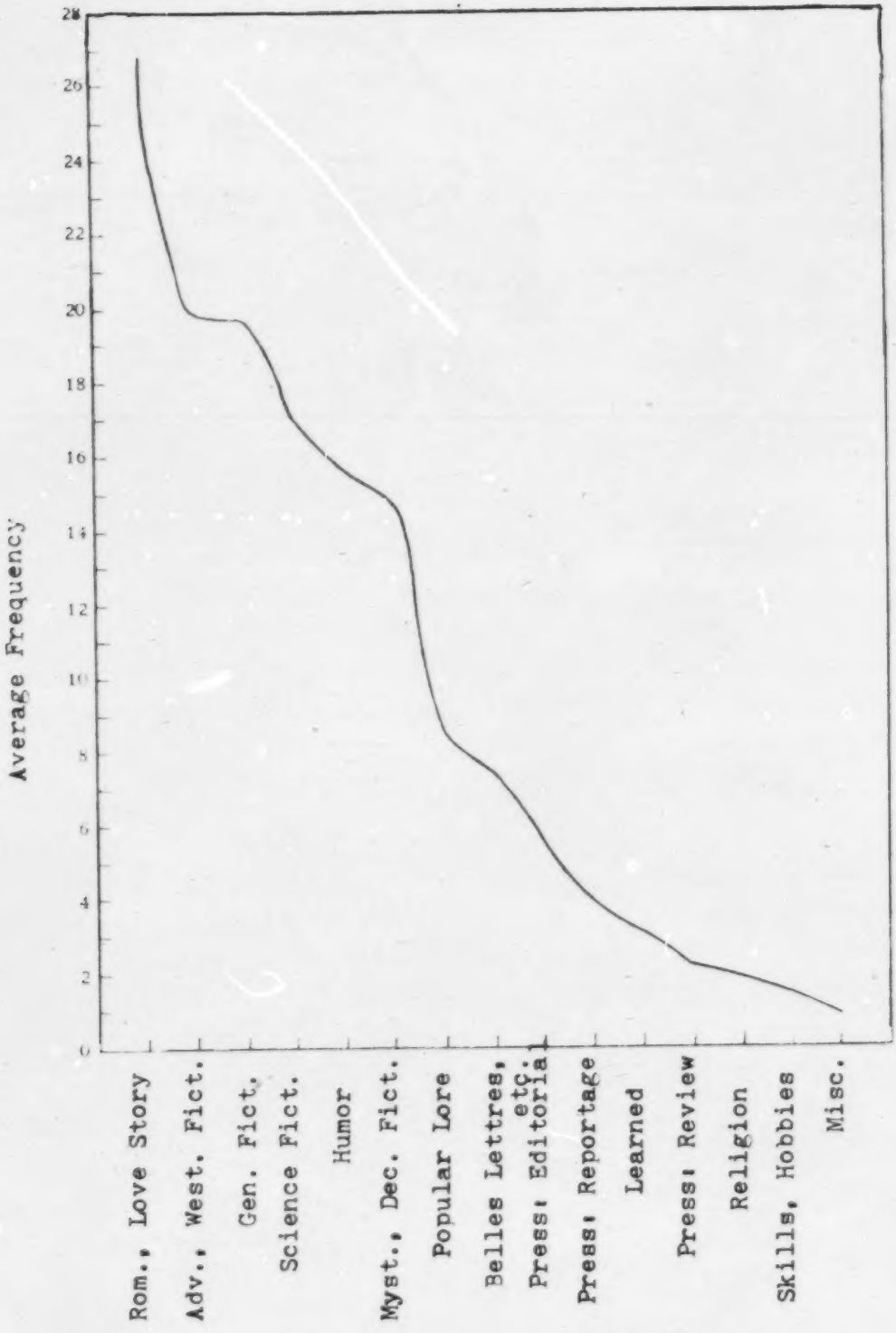
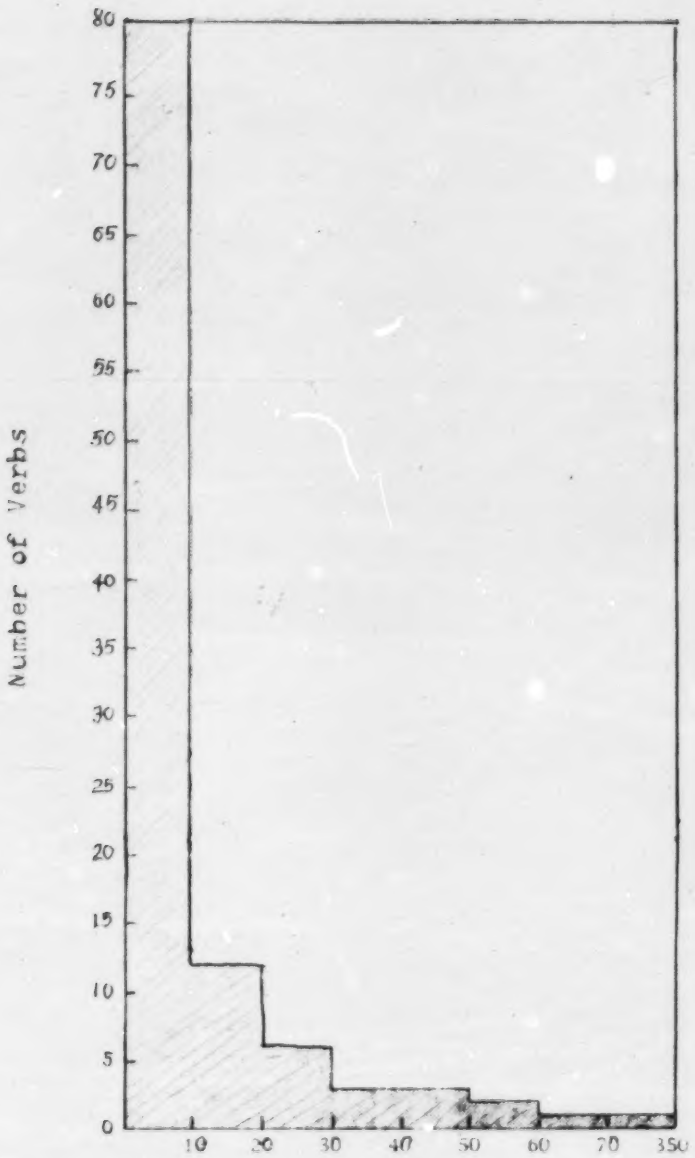


Figure 3: Average Frequency of Past Perfect by Subcategory



Frequency

Figure 4.

Distribution of Irregular Verbs in Perfect

are found, the three most frequent being be (345 occurrences), make (69), and have (51).

Of the 71 instances of perfect with progressive aspect, 37 are past perfect, 31 present, and 3 non-finite (depending on must, would, and might). Passive voice occurs in 377 instances, most often in the Learned subcategory because of the stylistic requirement to avoid the use of I. There are 101 contractions of have, has and had, one occuring with other than subject. There are 48 instances of perfect in subordinate clause introduced by temporal conjunction, "When the dust had settled, he went back."

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